

THREE DIFFERENT, BUT RELATED, MINDSETS TO CONSTITUTE A PARADIGM FOR COPING IN TIMES OF DISTRESS

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Abstract

Life is characterised by multiple forms of both suffering and happiness. How one experiences this dichotomy depends on one's choice of attitude, decision in that regard, and subsequent stance. The mind can be the greatest enemy in the case of someone in distress. However, it can also be the greatest therapeutic friend in the case of a person seeking to overcome distress. Sorrow can either feed that enemy or foster that friendship. The objective of the research reported on is to explore means of coping imaginatively during times of distress. In it I have combined three approaches that are closely related, but come from three totally different areas. The first approach comes from the sphere of counselling, and explores an aspect of the logotherapy of Victor Frankl. For Frankl, the human capacity for self-transcendence constitutes the basis of being human: through it humans express themselves and find fulfilment. The second approach comes from the sphere of theology, and relates to the guidance offered by the apostle Paul to the community in Philippi (Phil. 4:4–9). Paul advises his readers to seek joy and peace during times of distress by thinking about honourable and pleasing things. The final approach comes from the sphere of literature. It focuses on how "narrative fantasies" create virtual spaces and virtual realities in which to escape distress for as long as the fantasy exists. Whereas for Frankl the aim is to find meaning in life, and for Paul it is to find peace and joy in life, in narrative fantasies the aim is to experience excitement, pleasure, and

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enjoyment. These three approaches complement one another, for all three rely on the imagination.

Keywords

Escape from distress; imagination; self-transcendence; narrative fantasy; meaning in life; things of excellence; joy; pleasure

Introduction

The human brain is a remarkable organ. It has allowed humans to walk on the moon; to discover the universe(s); to invent computers and cell phones; to build the most magnificent cars and aeroplanes. Many tasks that we take for granted – like fastening our shoe laces and riding a bicycle – are achievements that robots and computers are unable to duplicate (Pinker 1999, 119).

My objective in this paper is to speak about how the brain, via the imagination,² can be used to cope with most kinds of suffering. In the magazine, *Spirituality & Health*, Cohen (2013, n.p.) shares important information about the connection between imagination and reality. She states that a person's mind can run away with them, leading them to act through suspicion or fear, but that people can also use their imagination as a tool to change their life.

She recounts that through the use of MRI scans it has been discovered that the cells in the brain that light up when a person performs a specific action also do so when he or she watches someone else performing the same action. This might explain why some people find action movies so exhilarating, or romantic movies so affecting. The same effect is achieved when people imagine themselves performing the action.

This paper contains an exploration of the way in which imagination can help in coping with distress. The first approach discussed comes from the sphere of counselling, and entails an aspect of the logotherapy of Victor Frankl. Frankl views the human capacity for self-transcendence as the basis of being human. Through it, humans express and fulfil themselves. The second approach comes from the sphere of theology, and relates to the guidance offered by the apostle Paul to the

² Davies (2012, n.p.) explains that "imagination" can refer to "creativity in general – saying that someone has a great imagination, or no imagination at all. Secondly, people use the word to refer to mental imagery of some kind" – creating a mental picture of something.

community in Philippi (Phil. 4:4–9). Paul advises his readers to experience joy and peace during times of distress by thinking about honourable and pleasing things. The final approach comes from the sphere of literature. It focuses on how "narrative fantasies" create virtual spaces and virtual realities in which to escape distress for as long as the fantasy lasts. Whereas for Frankl the aim is to find meaning in life, and for Paul it is to find peace and joy in life, the aim of narrative fantasies is to experience excitement, pleasure, and enjoyment. These three approaches complement one another, for all three involve the imagination.

Therapy and Well-being: Victor Frankl's Logotherapy as a Mechanism for Finding (Virtual) Meaning in Life during Times of Distress

The approach I discuss here comes from the sphere of counselling, and in particular Victor Frankl's logotherapy. The human race lives in "a broken world" – a world full of distress, of which some is inescapable, such as that associated with death, pain, and suffering: "Certain predicaments of the human life are unchangeable" (Havenga-Coetzer 2003, 100–101).³ Frankl refers to the emptiness, meaninglessness, purposelessness, and aimlessness experienced by people as the "existential vacuum" (Havenga-Coetzer 2003, 38).⁴ These things make people stressed, unhappy, and negative about life. However, for Frankl, "life is unconditionally meaningful, no matter what happens" (Marseille 1997, 5; Frankl n.d. (b), 3). Life is never without meaning (Frankl n.d. (b), 3).

In order to cope with these things, Frankl proposed a number of activities,⁵ the most central element of which is self-transcendence. This concept appears in almost all of Frankl's fundamental writings (Wolicki 2002, 69).

The following is an example from Frankl's own experience in a concentration camp during the Second World War. The starving prisoners

³ According to Frankl, problems can be either physical, psychological, or existential (cf. Havenga-Coetzer 2003, 8).

⁴ Boeree (2006, 6–8) refers to typical Frankl terminology to describe the existential vacuum: anticipatory anxiety. Similar ideas are hyper-intention and hyper-reflection. Frankl refers to depression, addiction and aggression as the "mass neurotic triad". For Frankl, various anxiety neuroses constitute the origins of the psychopathologies.

⁵ These are activities, or rather approaches, such as: self-distancing, self-detachment, self-disclosure, self-actualisation, self-interpretation (cf. Havenga-Coetzer 2003, 88–90).

around him in the camp thought constantly about food. The lack of food was a source of mental torment, and they could think of nothing else. To distance himself from this mindset, Frankl imagined himself speaking in a well-lit lecture hall with comfortable chairs.⁶ Through this imagined activity Frankl added meaning to his existence while in the concentration camp.⁷ In my research I applied Frankl's principle of self-transcendence to constitute "*virtual* meanings in the imagination".

Self-transcendence

For Frankl (1984, 66), self-transcendence constitutes the basis of being human. A person's ability to transcend the self enables him or her to reach beyond human conditions and circumstances. That is why Frankl (quoted in Kimble and Ellor 2000, 10) calls self-transcendence the "specifically human mode of being". Being human implies that people can surpass themselves, go beyond themselves to exceed their psycho-somatic conditions. To be human means to be directed toward another person or something other than the self (Frankl 1984, 168). One then forgets about the self when one serves a cause, fulfils a task, or reaches out to another (Frankl 1984, 66). Self-transcendence is the essence and foundation of human existence (cf. Frankl 1969, 55; cf. also Wolicki 2002, 68–72).

I used and applied Frankl's approach in this research, but in a different way from what Frankl intended with his axiom, "to find meaning in life". Frankl sees and interprets self-transcendence in a physico-existential way. In this research it is applied imaginative-existentially.

Havenga-Coetzer (2003, 89) defines Frankl's self-transcendence as

⁶ "I forced my thoughts [my emphasis] to turn to another subject. Suddenly I saw myself standing on the platform of a well-lit, warm and pleasant lecture room. In front of me sat an attentive audience on comfortable upholstered seats. I was giving a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp! All that oppressed me at that moment became objective, seen and described from the remote viewpoint of science. By this method I succeeded somehow in rising above the situation, above the sufferings of the moment, and I observed them as if they were already of the past. Both I and my troubles became the object of an interesting psycho-scientific study undertaken by myself" (Frankl 1992, 67–68). This implies that part of his "rising above" certain circumstances implies a relocation of space and in time.

⁷ Logotherapeutic techniques and their spiritual source (2010), <https://meaningtherapy.wordpress.com/2010/06/22/logotherapeutic-techniques-and-their-spiritual-source/>

the ability to look away from the self, from one's own pain, one's own circumstances, suffering or grief. It is the ability, to reach out to someone else to realize an ideal, or fulfil a task, and finally to reach out to a higher being, to God and in the process one forgets about oneself (see also Frankl n.d. (b), 3).

This definition refers to three levels at which meaning is pursued: God, other, self. According Wong (2016, n.p.), when people nurture all three of these levels of transcendence, they are able to develop good and healthy spiritual lifestyles.

Seeking ultimate meaning: For Frankl, ultimate meaning refers to Supra-meaning or God (cf. Boeree 2006, 10); people can vaguely understand it, but never truly comprehend it (Frankl n.d. (a), 10ff). Ultimate meaning echoes those presuppositions which stretch beyond rational analysis or explanation. Faith in ultimate meaning constitutes hope and comfort in the fact that physical death is not the end of everything. Some form of immortality exists (Wong 2016).

Seeking situational meaning: On this level people in distress must try to reach beyond their mental and situational constraints to connect with their own spiritual values and focus on their own spiritual principles. This involves being mindful of the present situation and recognising the possibility of rising thoughtfully above any form of dreadful circumstances (Wong 2016).

Seeking social meaning: Reaching out to others beyond self-actualisation can enable one to pursue other meaningful purposes. Engagements in and making valuable contributions to the lives of others will constitute different forms of meaning in the life of the person who has reached out.⁸ Life becomes meaningful to the extent that one becomes involved in the lives of others (see John 13, Jesus serving his disciples) (Wong 2016).

In conclusion, people are normally self-centred. However, self-focus should be redirected towards someone or something else. The response should be to search for the meaning of something that should be more important to the person than the distracting problem. Meaning will realise when success has been achieved imaginatively. For Frankl, self-transcendence entails moving away from the self to something or someone else.

What Frankl proposes physically can also be experienced imaginatively. Virtual meaning in life lies in the person's imagination; the

⁸ Meaning refers not to general meaning in life, but to a given moment of meaning (Giovenco 2002, 73).

person who imagines and creates meaning will find meaning and experience it for as long as the imagination of it lasts. Virtual meaning can be experienced promptly. This is what happened to Frankl while in the concentration camp. Beyond his existential circumstances he found virtual meaning in other and better virtual circumstances, imagining himself speaking in a well-lit lecture hall to the benefit of others.

Spirituality and Well-being: Pauline Spirituality as a Mechanism for Rejoicing and Experiencing Peace during Times of Distress

The approach I discuss here comes from the sphere of theology, and in particular the advice of the apostle Paul to the church in Philippi, in Greece. What Paul suggests to the Philippians (Phil 4:4–9) is something akin to Frankl's self-transcendence. His approach to distress establishes him as an archetype for the first-century Mediterranean world.

Socio-historical Circumstances of Paul and the Philippians

To understand Paul's advice to the Philippians requires an examination of their socio-historical circumstances. Antiquity also faced the brokenness of this world – only the nature of that brokenness differed from what is experienced today. The people of that time also experienced the inescapable misery of death, and of physical and emotional suffering. Mediterranean antiquity was marked by a profound pessimism about life. Suffering was interpreted and experienced as a prelude to and herald of death (Bloomquist 2007, 271); in antiquity, joy was hardly mentioned (cf. Dodds 1965).

Joy, however, was something that Paul thought he could offer to those in distress in Philippi. What makes his assertion so incredible is that his message was written from circumstances of extreme suffering (cf. Rapske 1994, 196–225; Bloomquist 2007, 274; see also DuBois 1991).

In Philippians 1:7 Paul reminds his readers about his own situation – he is in prison. He writes to update the readers in Philippi about his present situation and to tell them about the prospects for his future. He is in danger and is experiencing suffering, but at the same time rejoices and is optimistic (1:12–26; 2:24; Hawthorne 2004, Lvi).

Paul also writes to offer advice to the Philippians, who were a young Christian community at that time. In response to various rivalries (1:27; 2:4; 4:2) in the community, he exhorts his readers as early as in the first chapter to "strive side by side" with "one mind" and "one spirit"

(1:27) to overcome this particular problem. Paul views cognition as important, as seen in the exhortation to be "of the same mind" (2:2). Later in the letter he exhorts two women, Euodia and Syntyche, to be of "the same mind" (4:2, τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν).

In this pericope (Phil. 4:4–9) of six verses Paul uses seven different Greek words that are semantically related and which can be connected to cognition.⁹ This is quite remarkable because in such a short pericope these words¹⁰ link with two very positive concepts, namely "joy" (twice) and "peace" (twice) to constitute the opposite of "worries" (4:6).

For Paul the mind plays an important role in dealing with his and the community's appalling circumstances. Paul cannot change his circumstances (just as to some extent the Philippians cannot change theirs), but he can use his mind to cope with the situation. In such moments the psyche must kick in. He communicates his own experiences to the Philippians, and his advice to them on how to cope with the difficulties they find themselves in is that "their respect for one another's integrity" (Hawthorne 2004, 244) should be known to everybody; they should talk to God about their needs, they should let their minds dwell on "things of excellence" that are "worthy of praise", and last of all, they should listen to Paul's directions. Of primary interest and relevant for this research is Paul's reference to λογίζομαι (4:8, "to give careful thought to a matter" (Arndt, Danker, and Bauer 2000, 598)), and the exhortation already mentioned to let their minds dwell on "things of excellence" that are "worthy of praise".¹¹ Owing to the importance of what Paul writes about prayer in this pericope, a brief analysis of the text (4:5–6) will be given to complement what Paul writes about contemplative thinking about the "things of excellence" that are "worthy of praise".

Ultimate Focus (4:6–7)

For Paul, trust in the divine for support and the hope of divine involvement (4:4–7) should be part of overcoming dreadful circumstances for the believer. In this pericope Paul uses three semantically related words to exhort and influence the Philippians to help them to cope with their

⁹ Be known, 4:5; made known 4:6 (2x); understanding, 4:7; heart 4:7; mind, 4:7; think, 4:7; learned, 4:9; to think, 4:10.

¹⁰ Verse 4 is the only one in which there is no such a word.

¹¹ For Victor Frankl, if a person is to rise above the distress in their life, they have to focus on finding "meaning in life" – something objective. Paul's focus is different. He emphasises joy, peace and the absence of worry in a person's life – something subjective.

circumstances; all three, "joy", "peace", and "not to worry" are connected with divine involvement. He could say this, because it was part of his life.

- *Rejoice* (χαίρετε): Paul starts this pericope on a positive note with two strong exhortations, both in the imperative mood: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" (4:4, NSRV). In 4:4 Paul adds emphasis to these two exhortations by adding the two adverbs "always" (πάντοτε) and "again" (πάλιν). He himself rejoiced while in prison, experiencing suffering and facing the possibility of an unnatural death (1:18–20). For him it is possible. These exhortations invite the Philippians to transcend their circumstances. Paul's joy in the Lord was connected to his hope of being freed (1:18–19). His hope was founded on the God of peace (cf. Hawthorne 2004, Lvii).

- *Peace of God* (εἰρήνη τοῦ θεοῦ): In 4:7 and 4:9 Paul refers to "the peace of God" and "the God of peace". That he could talk to God (the God of peace) about his circumstances contributes to his also having a sense of peace and joy. According to Paul, trusting Christians can partake of the peacefulness that characterises God's very nature when they have made their needs known to God (Hawthorne 2004). In 4:7 he says that God's peace will be with them; now Paul writes that God himself, who himself is peace, will be with them.

- *Do not worry: the Lord is near* (5), *you can talk to Him* (6), *He will guard you* (7). The third relevant exhortation (another imperative) in this pericope is negative, but it has a positive thrust: "Do not worry about anything" (Melick 1991). The absence of worry will make joy and peace possible and real. Paul provides three reasons why the congregation should not worry. First, because "the Lord is near" (ἐγγύς, 4:5). This may mean that the Lord is close, present, and hence aware of a person's circumstances. This would have brought peace to the sincere believer. When an anxious child knows that his or her father is near or close by, then the anxiety will disappear (cf. Hawthorne 2004, 245).

The second reason why the believers should not worry is because they can talk to God and make their needs known to Him (4:6). When believers are able to engage in dialogue with God and inform Him about their circumstances, they will feel much better. Paul has first-hand experience of this, and knows the calming, strengthening, and therapeutic effect it has on the believer (Hawthorne 2004, 246).

Even more exciting is that this divine being can respond to the concerns of the one praying in such a phenomenal way, as Paul himself experienced, that it is incomprehensible to rational thinking. The phrase "the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding" infers that the peace that God provides is able to generate far better results than any

form of human design (cf. Hawthorne 2004, 247).¹² The believer's awareness and contemplative thinking about this can help the one who prays not to descend into misery (cf. Hawthorne 2004, 246).

The third thing Paul communicates about God is that he "will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (4:6). Those who trust God with their requests will find that He will protect their thoughts and feelings against the onslaughts of worry and fear (Hawthorne 2004, 247). For Paul this knowledge about and experience of God is a necessity for experiencing joy and peace of mind instead of worrying.

Personal Focus (4:8)

Paul writes in 4:8, "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, *think* (λογίζεσθε) *about these things*."

Λογίζεσθε is the main verb of the verse. Λογίζεσθαι (4:8), "to focus the mind on," is a strong verb that Paul liked to use. Arndt, Danker, and Bauer (2000, 598) define the verb "think" (λογίζεσθε) as "to give careful thought to a matter, think (about), consider, ponder, let one's mind dwell on something". He could say this and do this because he had already spoken to God about his distressful circumstances. Of the forty occurrences of the verb λογίζεσθαι in the New Testament, thirty-four are found in Paul's writings. Within the range of its meaning are the ideas of to ponder or let one's mind dwell on, or even to contemplate.¹³ He certainly intends through the use of this verb to suggest the result of the manifestation of it in activities (which relates to Frankl's meaning in life). This is evident in his advice that the Philippian Christians must carefully consider certain things. They must also evaluate them attentively for the ultimate purpose that these things should guide them into good deeds (cf. Heidland 1978, IV:289; Hawthorne 2004, 250). He asks them to focus their minds (λογίζεσθε) on the list of things referred to in 4:8, to attend fully to them, and to contemplate them carefully through action-provoking meditation. For Paul to think about such noble matters, the Philippians

¹² This relates closely to Frankl's views on finding meaning in life when one becomes involved in the lives of others.

¹³ λογίζεσθε, "focus your minds", relates to contemplative thinking. He advises them to think about positive things, things of excellence in life, such as truth, and things that are honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. This exercise in going beyond the turmoil of a person's experiences and circumstances has to do with cognition, the brain, the mind.

must also practise them constantly (Hawthorne 2004, 252). This will help them to imaginatively rise above their circumstances. This is to move the mind's focus from the circumstances to things worthy of praise.

Although not stated explicitly, for Paul, *contemplative thinking* about the "things of excellence" that are "worthy of praise" and the *imagination* of the things the Philippians have learnt, received, and heard from him and seen him doing, make possible a form of self-transcendence, which will allow them to rise above their circumstances.

Narrative Fantasy and Well-being: Fantasies as a Mechanism for Experiencing Joy, Excitement, and Pleasure during Times of Distress

The approach discussed in this last section comes from the sphere of literature, and in particular narrative fantasy. The logotherapy of Frankl has helped many people to find existential meaning in life, and Philippians 4:4–9, which could have been used in nouthetic therapy (see Adams 1982), has contributed to the liberation of many Christians from worries and stress through the contemplation of commendable things and trust in God.

The narrative fantasy approach can help a person to imaginatively transcend any form of distress for as long as the fantasy lasts. "Narrative" refers to the creation of one's own stories or fantasies. Within the context of this research, in narrative fantasy the focus is on the lived experiences of excitement and enjoyment embedded in the fantasies to draw attention away from the existential circumstances of suffering. The teachings of Frankl and Paul pave the way for this discussion of the use of narrative fantasies during times of distress: it is just another way of imagining. In narrative fantasies the objective approach of Frankl and subjective approach of Paul converge, as the focus is on both the self and the incorporation of the other.

If you watch movies or read novels for pleasure and excitement, then narrative fantasies are not as farfetched or childish as they sound. Le Guin (2006, 2) explains that in the past, and even today, fantasies were and are perceived as a genre of children's literature. However, she states that "to conflate fantasy with immaturity is a rather sizeable error," and that fantasy is the only genre that has the ability to cross age-lines (cf. Apostolides 2016).

Think about all the novels you have read, all the fiction movies you have watched over the years. Did you enjoy them? Of course you did! Do you still remember most of the heroes or main characters? Of course

you do! Narrative fantasies relate closely to novels and fiction. The fantasies all happen in the mind. The imagination creates its own times and spaces, events and characters, and the creator (you) can be part of this virtual or imaginative world.

According to Ricoeur (1965, 119), "The imagination has a prospective and explorative function in regard to the inherent possibilities of man." In his view (1974, 408), people can even perform beyond their potential. Imagination can allow people to explore their capabilities from other perspectives. In everyday situations, people may regard themselves as having and even experience having limited capabilities. Nevertheless, within the imagination, people can perceive themselves as capable of many things (Ricoeur 1981, 112; Apostolides 2016).

In the words of Albert Einstein, "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand".¹⁴ He also known for having said that "Logic will get you from A to Z; imagination will get you everywhere,"¹⁵ and "Imagination is intelligence having fun."¹⁶

While inhabiting this created or virtual world of fantasy, a person can create unlimited alternative possibilities, some of which have not yet been experienced in real life (cf. Reagan 1996, 106). Fantasies (the imagination) cultivate narratives, enabling people to transcend their limited existential spaces, their skills, and even their appearances. They can move anachronistically into another time and space and experience other faculties, some of which have never before been experienced or exploited: they can be good orators, exemplary leaders, excellent teachers, or exceed their past sporting achievements. In fantasies people can surpass or transcend their limited experiences through the creation of unlimited alternatives (cf. Thurston 1995, 47; also Apostolides 2016).

In the times and spaces of fantasies, the person who fantasises bypasses the protective barriers of convention that he or she has erected and the self-created narratives by which we make our lives more bearable (cf. Brown 2008, 268). In these narrative fantasies, people create new identities and characteristics for themselves. Hence, the innovation of fantasy through creative imagination stimulates people to engage with

¹⁴ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/556030-imagination-is-more-important-than-knowledge-for-knowledge-is-limited> from "Get Quotes Daily."

¹⁵ www.goodreads.com/.../2837-logic-will-get-you-from-a-to-z-imaginatio...

¹⁶ www.goodreads.com/.../1138105-imagination-isintelligence-having-fun 10/10/2016.

their identity, character, self-image, qualities, religiosity, and spirituality from alternative perspectives.

Through fantasies people are able to create narratives to enable them to rise above the distress in life. The fantasies referred to in this research have been referred to as “narrative fantasies” with reference to the creation of stories in a person's imagination. These can be either similar to or totally different from those narratives (stories) in novels or movies. They can be unrealistic with regard to the person's characteristics, self-image, and qualities. Narrative fantasies help people to put into practice that which they cannot practise in reality; to become what they wanted to become, or even go beyond that.

In other words, people can transform their values, character, and activities through imagination, to live out in their virtual world the lives that they find more satisfying and which can give rise to considerable pleasure and excitement. These fantasies are created and constructed in the imagination to escape the existential reality of suffering or unpleasant circumstances that trouble the person now in order to experience the opposite, or something totally different from the existential reality, while the fantasy lasts. Narrative fantasies, in the context of this paper, are more than mere escape mechanisms. They are created primarily so as to experience joy, pleasure, and excitement.

The excitement and enjoyment experienced in this context are embedded in the superlative. In novels and fiction the author creates the heroes; in narrative fantasies the creator can become or is the hero. The “creator” (you) can become the main character in these created interplays. In these narrative fantasies you become the most beautiful, the most attractive, the cleverest, the strongest, the fastest, the richest, and so on. You are not becoming the best, you *are* the best! That is what makes it so exciting! The lived excitement of the virtual realities raises you above the situation of distress, creating a desire to be repeated and experienced over and over again.

Conclusion

This paper explored immediate methods of coping during times of distress. In many instances circumstances cannot be changed rapidly, or even changed at all. However, the imagination can be harnessed to cope cognitively with situations of distress. The objective of the research carried out was to show how the imagination can create immediate relief during times of distress. The imagination can be utilised to create and discern virtual meaning in all circumstances through self-transcendence

(as proposed by Frankl), to contemplate the valuable things in life (as proposed by Paul), and to create narrative fantasies in virtual spaces and times in which a person can construct "other" realities as a means to experience excitement, pleasure, and joy for as long as the fantasy lasts.

The interaction between these three approaches should not be interpreted as being linear, with the approaches following one another consecutively, but rather as one in which the approaches operate in parallel, complementing and reinforcing one another.

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